



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Bowman, Benjamin (2019) Imagining future worlds alongside young climate activists: a new framework for research. *Fennia - International Journal of Geography*, 197 (2). pp. 295-305.

Downloaded from: <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/625066/>

Version: Published Version

Publisher: Geographical Society of Finland

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.85151>

Usage rights: Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Imagining future worlds alongside young climate activists: a new framework for research

BENJAMIN BOWMAN



Bowman, B. (2019) Imagining future worlds alongside young climate activists: a new framework for research. *Fennia* 197(2) 295–305. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.85151>



Young people's climate activism must stand as one of the most remarkable and important mass movements of our age. At levels of organization from the local to the global, young climate activists are coming together in massive mobilizations, and particularly school strikes, under the names of Fridays For Future, #FridaysForFuture, Youth for Climate, Youth Strike for (or 4) Climate and School Strike for (or 4) Climate. This article responds to the most extensive study of young people's climate action published to date, entitled 'Protest for a Future: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European Cities'. In this significant and provocative article, an analysis is provided of the potential – and the need – for empirical work at local and international levels concerning youth climate activism that recognizes the often complex, liminal nature of young political agency and the diverse, intersecting motives that lead young people to demonstrate for action on climate change. Through this analysis, this article contributes to theoretical innovation to get beyond rigid, top-down understandings of young people's political engagement, and instead build theory from young people's visions of social, economic and political change in response to climate emergency.

Keywords: young people, climate change, FridaysForFuture, activism, environmentalism, ecologism, politics, social movements.

Benjamin Bowman, Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, Geoffrey Manton Building 14, Rosamond St. West, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK. E-mail: b.bowman@mmu.ac.uk.

Introduction

In 2019, an international group of natural scientists co-signed a letter to the journal *Science* stating that 'the world's youth have begun to persistently demonstrate for the protection of the climate and other foundations of human well-being' (Hagedorn *et al.* 2019, 364) at a time of intersecting crises of climate change, ecological collapse, environmental degradation, climate injustice and mass extinction. The letter called for scholars to respect young people for their leadership and to offer full support. Our task, to quote the renowned young climate activist Greta Thunberg, is 'to act as if the house is on fire, because it is' (Thunberg 2018). For young activists and supportive scientists alike, the Fridays for

Future school strikes occur at no less than the end of the world. A new world is imminent: that is to say, a new world sculpted by anthropogenic changes to the environment, and perhaps restructured by social, political, economic and cultural reform.

In this article I respond to the research paper, and accompanying country-by-country reports, entitled 'Protest for a Future: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European Cities' co-authored by an international team of 21 researchers (Wahlström *et al.* 2019). This report is, at the time of writing, the most extensive scientific study of young people's climate action in publication. It was conducted using an established method developed under the title "Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation" (CCC) (Walgrave *et al.* 2016), which is a method that uses teams of researchers to provide a probabilistic sample of a public demonstration, whether static or moving. Notably, the research teams employ a 'pointer' who identifies participants to the interviewer, to minimize selection bias on the part of researchers who might otherwise interview participants who appear approachable (Walgrave & Verhulst 2011). The authors of the 'Protest for a Future' report conclude that 'further research is needed to follow the development of the first massive youth mobilization on climate change', and they 'strongly encourage research efforts to continue following this movement as it develops over time' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 17).

I contextualize the findings of Wahlström and colleagues (2019) within a broader academic literature on young people's political action in the age of 'the "precarious generation"... motivated by a strong sense of situated injustice', by the sense that they are 'deprived of a decent future and the feeling they had been betrayed by governments' (Pickard & Bessant 2018a, 100). I argue that more-or-less binary concepts of political action, such as the framing of instrumental political goals as distinct compared to expressive political goals, are familiar in academic research concerning young people's politics, but may limit researchers' ability to understand young people's complex political subjectivities.

This article makes two challenges. First, it challenges binary approaches to young people's political subjectivities, based on an understanding of the young person as a political agent in hybrid, shifting and complex ways. Second, that specifically in the field of geography, existing work on youth-led climate action establishes the need to challenge 'top down information flows' (Tanner 2010) on climate change and, instead, to explore young people's imaginations of different worlds, different institutions and different ways of doing and thinking. These challenges, it is argued, should drive the discipline of geography and subfields including political geographies and participatory geographies towards more youth-centred and participatory studies, such as the groundbreaking work of Trajber *et al.* (2019) with young people in Brazil. Climate action is more than protest: it is also a world-building project, and creative methodologies can aid researchers and young climate activists as we imagine, together, worlds of the future.

Background: reflecting on young people's 'Protest for a Future'

Young people do not only bear witness to the world's crisis. They are agents in constructing the world, and global youth-led direct action – as seen on the 15th of March, 2019 – forms a critical part of the social construction of the crisis humanity faces. The lion's share of public discourse about youth-led climate action is taken up by adult-centric calls to 'listen to science' (Evensen 2019) and for young people to engage with political institutions in order to push adult policymakers to listen to science and to 'tell the truth about the facts' (Boykoff & Yulsman 2013, 363). Listening to scientists and speaking truth to power-brokers is part of the fire-fighting portion of climate action, but putting the fire out is surely only one part of the task at hand: for young people motivated to protect the foundations of human well-being on the planet, climate action is also about rebuilding the world so that the causes of the crisis are addressed. Although the 'Protest for a Future' project does not explore young people's perspectives on social, cultural and political changes in great detail, the suggestion that structural change and system change would be among the desires of young climate activists is written between the lines. The authors note that Fridays For Future activists 'expressed strong identification with both instrumental goals' such as putting pressure on politicians, 'and expressive goals', expressing personal visions and identities (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 14).

The 'Protest for a Future' study was conducted by teams of researchers handing out surveys, and carrying out screening interviews, with participants of all ages in Fridays for Future demonstrations across 13 European towns and cities, from Truro in Cornwall to Warsaw in Poland. Across the study, 9,162 surveys were distributed of which 1,925 responses were returned, accompanied in the corpus of data by 1,561 short, face-to-face interviews (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 7). The project did not survey children younger than 14 (other than to record their age) but found 45% of participants across the sample were aged between 14 and 19, and that 'the protests were strongly dominated by women' especially among school students (among whom 66.4% were young women) (*ibid.*, 8). Other topline findings of the study include the disproportionately high level of education in the sample, including that overall 71.3% of school students surveyed had at least one parent with a university degree (*ibid.*, 9), the characterization of the protests not only including a 'high number of first-time demonstrators' but also including demonstrators who had 'little involvement in conventional politics' (*ibid.*, 10).

The authors of the Protest for a Future project identify respondents holding 'a hopeful attitude towards the future' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 4), that at least some respondents are calling for 'systemic change' (*ibid.*, 49) at least according to the researchers from the section of the report from Belgium, and that there were 'important differences within the movement' (*ibid.*, 16) which indicates a global conversation among young climate activists about the world they wish to see, rather than a single vision. These differences are reflected in a wide diversity among the sampled cases, including, for instance, 'significant age variation with an almost exclusive participation of young activists in the Netherlands and Poland and a more even distribution of age groups in Belgium'. The 'Protest for a Future' study tells the story of a heterogeneous movement with some salient characteristics.

Who are the young climate activists in 'Protest for a Future'?

In 'Protest for a Future', the authors profile the participants in the climate strike as – in general terms, and notwithstanding variation between each country in the country reports – much younger than a typical street demonstration. They report an overall median age of 21 years, and the largest age group among the demonstrators being participants aged between 14 and 19, constituting 45% of the total group (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 8). They draw attention to the gender distribution. In comparative projects undertaken in other street demonstrations, researchers found an average result of 47% female participants. In the Fridays for Future protests, the 'Protest for a Future' team report 66.4% of the demonstrators across the sample were women, and that women 'strongly dominated' among school students (*ibid.*, 8). The researchers point out that 'street demonstrations in general and climate protests in particular tend to be the domain of the well-educated' and that, for instance, 71.3% of the school students in their dataset had at least one parent with a university degree (*ibid.*, 9). The Fridays for Future demonstrators were remarkable, in the conclusion of the research team, because so many were taking action for the first time. 38.1% of the overall sample were first-timers (*ibid.*, 10). The high number of first-timers, they conclude, is in part 'a consequence of the young age of the participating population'.

Another remarkable feature of the Fridays for Future demonstrators, commented upon by the 'Protest for a Future' study, is that 'the entire framing of this movement is about young people demanding that adults take responsibility for safeguarding their future', and that although adults participate, they 'do so mainly in solidarity with the young' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 10). The report suggests a social network of mobilization arising from homophily (McPherson *et al.* 2001), beginning with 'young front-runners' who invite like-minded friends and especially school friends. 32.9% of school students indicated to the researchers that they had been personally asked to participate in the demonstration, and that of those 70.5% were asked by one or more friends (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 11).

Significantly more respondents told the researchers they had recruited friends. 72.4% of school students 'personally asked someone else to join them in demonstrating'. Of those who had asked someone else to join them, 67.9% had not personally been asked by someone else (*ibid.*, 11). Considering pathways of recruitment, 81.1% of demonstrators who had asked someone else to join them had targeted their recruitment attempt at a friend, and 64.9% had tried to recruit a schoolmate (the 'Protest for a Future' team asked respondents to categorize each invited person to one category only, so 'schoolmates' and 'friends' are mutually exclusive categories for purposes of the study).

Wahlström and colleagues (2019, 12) conclude that 'much of the recruiting takes place in the context of schools and shared classes... [creating] a structural environment where social pressure is successfully employed' by young people announcing they will demonstrate and inviting friends and peers personally to do the same. Personal connections appear vital. Despite climate protests (at least in Western Europe) typically being among the type of demonstration where lone protesters are more frequent (Wahlström & Wennerhag 2014), most demonstrators in the Fridays for Future case came with friends. On average across the study, 87% of school students indicated they demonstrated along with one or more friends. Wahlström and colleagues (2019, 13) also note the relative infrequency among young protesters of attending with a parent or family member (6.7%), a co-member of an organization (6.4%) or a partner (6%).

The 'Protest for a Future' study leaves many opportunities open for studying this remarkable group of young people. First, and notably, the study focusses on Europe with data generation in the following countries (number of individual sites in brackets): UK (2), Sweden (2), Germany (2), Switzerland (2), Netherlands (1), Belgium (1), Italy (1), Austria (1) and Poland (1), and the follow-up study, yet to be published, included a site in Hungary (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 4). Yet, the movement documented is a global movement (*ibid.*, 5) and this surely requires comparative work from other places.

Second, although the study measures gender (by male/female) and, in an oblique fashion, class (by the gathering of data on parental education, for instance), the study excludes other vital comparative factors in the identity and belonging of the young protesters. Not least, the study does not mention the ethnic background or racialization of young people in the study. Indeed, at research sites in the UK, Belgium and Italy (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 32, 41, 112) participants in the climate strike are recorded calling for 'climate justice', a discursive framing that is historically connected to the relationship between race, poverty, and environmental risk (Schlosberg & Collins 2014).

Third, it is understandable that the study measures emotions such as worry, anxiety, 'despair' and hopelessness among climate protesters (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 15) but there is no mention of data generation on positive emotions apart from the statement 'I feel hopeful about policies being able to address climate change' (*ibid.*, 15). This is extremely challenging, given that the study concludes participants were 'more "worried" and "angry" than hopeless' (*ibid.*, 15). The participants do not come across in the report expressing sadness or negative emotions but, on the contrary, are documented as very happy. In Vienna, the study records 'despite the cloudy weather, the general atmosphere was very joyful and festival-like' (*ibid.*, 91); in Amsterdam, 'the atmosphere was very friendly and cheerful... the demonstrators were dancing and enjoying themselves' (*ibid.*, 54); in Berlin, also 'cheerful' (*ibid.*, 69); in Warsaw, 'the atmosphere was cheerful' and the rally eventually 'transformed into a dance party' (*ibid.*, 81); and in Manchester 'an excited youthful atmosphere – lots of chanting' (*ibid.*, 32).

It is important to reflect on the incongruence between the survey, a top-down mode of data collection authored by adult researchers, which seems to have imposed negative emotional frames on political action that, according to the study, appeared to have been cheerful and positive. It is evident in the study that the protests were places of joy, dancing, excitement and positivity. The researchers ignore this factor almost entirely, despite a rich existing literature on the role of joy in social movements (Jasper 1998; Shepard 2011; Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014; Ramírez Blanco 2018) and suchlike contemporary work indicating that 'play, laughter, and fun are important elements in any process of resistance' (Crossa 2013, 826).

Joy is missing, at least in part, because the study relies on a top-down, adult-led and binary framing of the political action of young people. Specifically, the 'Protest for a Future' study reproduces an either-or framework for young political action that contrasts instrumental goals with self-expression (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 14). It is not argued to be the case that the researchers witnessed the joy of young people at the protests and decided to ignore it in their analysis: rather, the research design and underlying methodology were not prepared for the complexity of young people's politics. For this reason, dancing, cheerfulness and 'youthful atmosphere', when encountered, were filtered out as incongruous with a pre-existing definition of the political.

In the next section, the processes by which traditional methods for analysis exclude young people's concerns, sentiments and agency from the realm of the political are examined. The

complexity of young people's politics challenges studies like 'Protest for a Future' to think differently about what constitutes the political.

Challenging concepts: the complexity of young people's politics

Despite the richness of vision among members of the movement, researchers lack data concerning the ways young people who are leading on global climate action construct and co-construct future worlds. The public imagination of the climate crisis tends to restrict young people to having a voice, as opposed to having power; society tends to perceive young people as subjects of political engagement more than agents of change.

The profile of young protesters is likely to present a methodological challenge. For instance, a group of young people who are mostly joined by personal connections between friends and school-mates, but not, strictly speaking, according to organizational membership, is a challenge to methodological approaches that distinguish between the two – as, indeed, the 'Protest for a Future' study does by conceptualizing political goals according to a dichotomy of 'instrumental goals... and expressive goals' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 14). For another example of a major methodological challenge, this group of young people are made up, in a significantly large proportion, of women. The dominance of women in an activist group must challenge researchers to recognize the gendered politics of defining politics: as Briggs (2008) pointed out, the lifestyles and concerns of young women in particular can be excluded from the realm of the political by traditional approaches.

Traditional concepts of the political struggle to deal with young people's politics. In Muthoni Mwaura's (2018, 66) study of young participants in student environmental clubs in Kenya, she argues that young people developed a hybrid political identity that 'straddled two seemingly incongruous positions: a commitment to a neoliberal agenda of self-making and a commitment to environmental politics'. One participant in the study, a fourth year student named Catherine, claiming to have learned new skills through the club, reported:

Through [the club], I have been able to gain more skills on issues beyond tree planting. I have been able to do a lot all over the country. It also opens me up to learn many new things and new environmental aspects. It's not just about planting trees, there are policies and regulations for the conservation of environment, education, green economy; it's actually how we govern the environment. (Muthoni Mwaura 2018, 68)

Young people, like the activists in Muthoni Mwaura's work, can be considered 'political entrepreneurs' who increasingly operate as Do-It-Ourselves or DIO citizens (Pickard 2019, 375). The concept of the Do-It-Ourselves citizen has a long history, from the work of Bang (2010) on 'everyday makers' to the more institutional political framing of young people as 'engaged sceptics' or 'committed sceptics' (Wring *et al.* 1999; O'Toole *et al.* 2003; Henn & Foard 2014), to the approach to young people as 'networked citizens' (Loader *et al.* 2014). In brief, this general approach to young politics theorizes that make up one part of young people's expanded toolbox for political action, which includes everyday making (Bang 2010), lifestyle politics, political consumerism, boycotting/buycotting, issue-based politics and local and global networking.

Non-institutional participation has not always supplanted institutional participation, of course: for instance, in the UK, the influence of young people in electoral politics can be exemplified both by the recent reversal of the historic decline in youth electoral turnout (Sloam & Ehsan 2017; Allsop *et al.* 2018) and by the remarkable level of influence that young people have had over the Labour Party (Pickard 2018; Young 2018). The recent history of UK politics perhaps lends itself to examples writ in bold, but the shift of young people's political activity towards a more issue-oriented, standby citizenship will be familiar in the international context. This shift is led by socioeconomic change (Harris 2017) that, of course, varies by context but is a generational trend that scholars also address and assess globally (Bessant *et al.* 2017), and in this context they must be considered alongside a decade of anti-austerity and democratic deficit protests around the world (Della Porta 2015).

Returning to the young protesters in 'Protest for a Future', there is an echo of Muthoni Mwaura's (2018) 'jarring incongruity' in the 'instrumental goals... and expressive goals' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 14) of the Fridays for Future protesters. This is not a criticism of the project – which is a vital and important

piece of work – but a reflection on a methodological framing concerning young people's politics in which the two are rendered separately, as they are in protest participation studies more generally (Klandermans 2007). This binary definition of young politics is durable despite the ways young people 'take up more individualized and everyday practices in efforts to shape society' (Harris *et al.* 2010, 28). These bridge the public and private, and the institutional political and the everyday political.

The jarring nature of the incongruity between 'instrumental goals... and expressive goals' arises from the struggle of traditional, binary definitions of politics to conceptualize the young person as a political agent in hybrid, shifting and complex ways. Despite the complexity of young people's political subjectivities, a dis/engagement binary dominates our imaginary of young people's politics. In particular, great attention is paid to the question of generational or cohort effects leading young people to 'disengage' from formal politics: asking why young people are disengaged from formal politics is so ubiquitous in the literature that it has been described as a 'mantra' (Banaji 2008). When one divides instrumental goals from expressive ones, for instance, one is led by the question of political engagement versus political disengagement, and, accordingly, by epistemologies grounded in binary definitions. This action over here is political, and this is not; this young person is engaging, and this one is disengaged; this action is instrumental because it is aimed at policymakers, and this one is about expressing one's identity.

Challenging methods: stepping beyond the binary

Methodological tools for studying politics in young people's lives also tend to follow dichotomies: dividing the political from the not political, the formal from the informal, and participation in adult-centric institutions from non-participation in the same. Other methods are possible, such as youth-led surveys (Fine & Torre 2019), youth participatory action research (Anderson 2017; Trajber *et al.* 2019), participatory focus groups (Bagnoli & Clark 2010) and place-based creative methods (Wood 2012), as well as youth-centred framings that place young people's political action into a dedicated youth context (Holmberg & Alvinus 2019).

Binary concepts of the political and the not political, the engaged and the disengaged, struggle when researchers encounter the diaphanous political consciousness of young people and 'young people's own uncertainty and ambiguity in describing what "counts" as political action beyond the formal and adult-centric definitions which they are likely to have been exposed to in their life course' (Wood 2012, 214). That ambiguity leads, in a general sense, to a well-established literature that attempts to bridge the gap. As Skelton (2010) writes, researching young people's politics is *both* about identifying more formal, public political activity in alignment with adult institutions and practices on the one hand, *and* less formal, more private, and more everyday young politics on the other. There are big-P, more institutional, formalized politics and there are little-P, more everyday, less formalized politics. In this body of work it is, broadly speaking, considered that formal and institutional political action and more everyday political practices are not separate but are rather like two sides of the same coin (e.g. Skelton & Valentine 1997; O'Toole *et al.* 2003; Philo & Smith 2003; Bang 2010; Wood 2012; Kallio & Häkli 2013; Ekström 2016; Percy-Smith 2016).

It is also considered that young people 'play active roles in both public large-scale events as well as more private small-scale matters' and that '[more formal, institutional] "Politics" and [less formal, more everyday] "politics" do not exist apart from each other but are co-constituted in the socio-spatial practices of everyday life and policy-making' (Kallio & Häkli 2011a, 64). As a body of work, in epistemological terms, the big-P/little-P approach tends to take 'young people's own uncertainty and ambiguity' (Wood 2012, 214) as an invitation to seek a different sense of the political than, say, literature on electoral engagement (Bhatti *et al.* 2012; Phelps 2012) or typological approaches that attempt to distinguish the political from the not political (van Deth 2014). Taxonomizing young people's activities into typologies of the political (as in Hooghe *et al.* 2014; van Deth 2014; Rainsford 2017) remains a vital and important empirical task in its own way, but one which subjects young people – in their 'uncertainty and ambiguity' (Wood 2012, 214) – to the interpretative lens of the political scientist. It is not necessary to distinguish between the political and the not-political, nor is it necessary to distinguish between instrumental motivations and expressive ones.

World-imagining exercises in uncertain times

Young people live, as Pickard and Bessant (2018b) put it, in time of crises. Among these crises, the climate crisis stands out for the dominance of the idea that young people must push adult policymakers to 'listen to science' (Evensen 2019) and 'tell the truth about the facts' (Boykoff & Yulsman 2013, 363). This must surely impede our ability, as researchers, to work with young people, encountered in states of 'uncertainty and ambiguity' as to what counts as within the political realm (Wood 2012, 214). It is noteworthy that the 'Protest for a Future' project found the 'majority of respondents' in every country 'stated they were "quite" or "very" interested in politics' (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 16), a finding that in itself is worthy of deeper investigation.

This framing of the climate crisis places it in a public arena 'where common issues are deliberated by [adult] representatives and politicians' (Kallio & Häkli 2011b, 4). The relatively young age of the protesters in Fridays for Future demonstrations is likely to be relevant, especially in the case of protesters who are too young to vote in the places where they live (Wahlström *et al.* 2019, 8). The relative dominance of young women in the demonstrations is also likely to influence protesters in terms of their relationship to the public arena, according to the gendered nature of political institutions and processes and their particular effect on young women (Briggs 2008, 2016). These factors contribute to 'the continued dominance of top-down information flows' in climate change narratives (Tanner 2010). Yet, I contend the task of researchers who stand in support of young people as leaders on climate action (Hagedorn *et al.* 2019, 364) as well as those researchers who hold a more detached scientific interest in young climate activists and their work, is to work beyond that framing.

To explore the sorts of worlds young activists wish to see, it is of critical importance that researchers do not divide instrumental goals from expressive goals, institutional participation from everyday politics, and so on. Responding to the 'Protest for a Future' project, which identified the salience of friendship networks and social pressure in schools, the data simply contraindicate such divisions as they unnecessarily divide practices like *expressing yourself* from *recruiting fellow activists*. Such divisions militate against exploring the political action of many within the age group identified by 'Protest for a Future' as most important because, in most of Europe, under-18s are barred by law and/or hindered by hurdles like linguistic norms from many means of instrumental political activity, especially the vote.

Meanwhile, young people are often understood 'to be special kinds of human', at once bridging the gap between the present and future, and also being 'the material from which the future will be made' (Lee 2013, 1). They 'are being positioned as future leaders whom the public expects to overcome the legacies of environmental inaction... [but] currently have limited opportunities to cultivate, voice and express their understandings, concerns and imaginings about climate change within their local environments and communities' (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2019, 2). 'Top-down information flows' about climate change (Tanner 2010) prefigure the young person as something of a societal investment in a commodity future, as they are the raw material from which society will reproduce itself and also the bearers of that society.

For young people who wish to see a different society, who do not wish to bear the current one, or who simply are not sure what to think, the conceptual burden of what is termed political engagement is problematic. If young people are the material from which future institutions will be made, and if young people will be the leaders of those institutions, what about young activists who neither want to remake nor lead those institutions, but imagine different worlds, different institutions and different ways of doing and thinking? A dichotomous framework of engagement versus disengagement pushes young people who refuse the burden of reconstituting current political institutions (or who are in states of uncertainty and ambiguity, to paraphrase Wood (2012, 214)) into conceptual boxes marked 'expressive', 'apolitical', 'antipolitical', 'disengaged'. The 'Protest for a Future' report (Wahlström *et al.* 2019) identifies young activists standing with one foot in the public arena and one in the private. They demonstrate as a way to take instrumental political action to influence decision-makers *and also* to express themselves. They build organizing networks of issue-oriented social control *and also* attend the march with friends. This complexity and in-between-ness is familiar in young people's politics generally, and in young protest politics specifically.

Conclusion: what current and future worlds do young activists bear?

Writing in part on climate change, Levitas (2013, xi) claims 'the reconstitution of society in imagination and in reality is a pressing need'. At least in popular fiction, 'overwhelmingly, climate change appears... as part of a futuristic dystopian and/or apocalyptic setting' (Johns-Putra 2016, 269). For instance, in the sci-fi space exploration game *Stellaris*, one fictional planet available for discover by the player comes with the message:

... Some of the more radical elements within the scientific community suggest that the dramatic climate shift may have been brought on by the unchecked emission of gaseous industrial by-product into the atmosphere.

This view is confined to the scientific fringe, as it is unlikely that any race intelligent enough to achieve full industrialization would be stupid enough to accidentally wipe themselves out. (*Stellaris* 2016)

The dystopian imaginary, regarding climate change, can be argued to play a deciding role in the methodology behind the 'Protest for a Future' study (Wahlström *et al.* 2019) in the survey approach to examining anxiety, fear and hopelessness; but also in the way the survey moves cheerfulness, joy and 'youthful'-ness in the protest site to the margins of the study. To do so, as this article contends, is part of a general approach to young people's politics that constrains young agency to dichotomies of political instrumentality versus self-expression. The dystopian and future-oriented vision of the 'Protest for a Future' study, which is evident in its emphasis on affects like anxiety and agency as a process of demanding political elites take a different course, leaves little room for the research to explore young people's imaginaries concerning the world they live in, nor the future worlds they perceive.

Exploring young people's climate action requires a more open, more participatory approach to research. It requires researchers to challenge 'top-down information flows' (Tanner 2010) concerning climate change. Daniels (2011, 182) writes that imagination is somewhere between the realms of fact and fiction, the subjective and objective, the real and representational; and that, in geography, imagination 'is a way of encompassing the condition of both the known world and the horizons of possible worlds' (*ibid.*, 183). Geographers must encounter young activists somewhere between the realms of the big-P and the little-p of politics in order to understand their imagination of the known world and worlds to come.

The 'Protest for a Future' study (Wahlström *et al.* 2019) raises so many questions about the current 'massive youth mobilization' and its 'peculiar characteristics' (*ibid.*, 17). I identify a lack of knowledge in academic literature and in public discourse concerning one prominent question in particular. In what ways do young activists imagine the world today, and in what ways do they imagine worlds to come, both those they wish to bear and worlds they think should not be borne? As well as calling powerful adults to 'listen to the science' (Evensen 2019), where are the remarkable young activists of the Fridays for Future movement headed? There is much work to be done for scientists who wish to listen.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Dr. Chloé Germaine Buckley (Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University) for her support in discussing the topic of young people's climate activism. This article developed with the support of Dr. Bronwyn Wood (Victoria University of Wellington) and Dr. Catherine Walker (University of Manchester) as reviewers in an open review process: and the author thanks both reviewers for their advice and constructive criticism, and the journal Chief Editor, Dr. Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, for support through the publication process. The author's current research project on young activists and the Fridays For Future movement is ongoing, and is funded by a Research Accelerator Grant from the Research and Knowledge Exchange Directorate, Manchester Metropolitan University.

References

- Allsop, B., Briggs, J. & Kisby, B. (2018) Market values and youth political engagement in the UK: towards an agenda for exploring the psychological impacts of neo-liberalism. *Societies* 8(4) 95. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8040095>
- Anderson, G. (2017) Participatory action research (PAR) as democratic disruption: new public management and educational research in schools and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30(5) 432–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1303211>
- Bagnoli, A. & Clark, A. (2010) Focus groups with young people: a participatory approach to research planning. *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(1) 101–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260903173504>
- Banaji, S. (2008) The trouble with civic: a snapshot of young people's civic and political engagements in twenty-first century democracies. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11(5) 543–561. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260802283008>
- Bang, H. (2010) Everyday makers and expert citizens: active participants in the search for a new governance. In Fenwick, J. & McMillan, J. (eds.) *Public Management in the Postmodern Era: Challenges and Prospects*, 163–191. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Bessant, J., Farthing, R. & Watts, R. (2017) *The Precarious Generation: A Political Economy of Young People*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644493>
- Bhatti, Y., Hansen, K. M. & Wass, H. (2012) The relationship between age and turnout: a roller-coaster ride. *Electoral Studies* 31(3) 588–593. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2012.05.007>
- Boykoff, M. T. & Yulsman, T. (2013) Political economy, media, and climate change: sinews of modern life. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 4(5) 359–371. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.233>
- Briggs, J. (2008) Young women and politics: an oxymoron? *Journal of Youth Studies* 11(6) 579–592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260802193132>
- Briggs, J. (2016) *Young People and Political Participation: Teen Players*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-31385-0>
- Crossa, V. (2013) Play for protest, protest for play: artisan and vendors' resistance to displacement in Mexico City. *Antipode* 45(4) 826–843. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01043.x>
- Daniels, S. (2011) Geographical imagination: boundary crossings. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36(2) 182–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00440.x>
- Della Porta, D. (2015) *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*. Polity, Bristol.
- van Deth, J. W. (2014) A conceptual map of political participation. *Acta Politica* 49(3) 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.6>
- Ekström, M. (2016) Young people's everyday political talk: a social achievement of democratic engagement. *Journal of Youth Studies* 19(1) 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1048207>
- Evensen, D. (2019) The rhetorical limitations of the #FridaysForFuture movement. *Nature Climate Change* 9(6) 428–430. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0481-1>
- Fine, M. & Torre, M. E. (2019) Critical participatory action research: a feminist project for validity and solidarity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319865255>
- Hagedorn, G., Kalmus, P., Mann, M., Vicca, S., Van den Berge, J., van Ypersele, J.-P., Bourg, D., Rotmans, J., Kaaronen, R., Rahmstorf, S., Kromp-Kolb, H., Kirchengast, G., Knutti, R., Seneviratne, S. I., Thalmann, P., Cretney, R., Green, A., Anderson, K., Hedberg, M., Nilsson, D., Kuttner, A. & Hayhoe, K. (2019) Concerns of young protesters are justified. *Science* 364(6436) 139–140. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aax3807>
- Harris, A. (2017) Young people, politics and citizenship. In Furlong, A. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, 295–300. Routledge, London.
- Harris, A., Wyn, J. & Younes, S. (2010) Beyond apathetic or activist youth: "ordinary" young people and contemporary forms of participation. *YOUNG* 18(1) 9–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880901800103>
- Henn, M. & Foard, N. (2014) Social differentiation in young people's political participation: the impact of social and educational factors on youth political engagement in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(3) 360–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.830704>
- Holmberg, A. & Alvinus, A. (2019) Children's protest in relation to the climate emergency: a qualitative study on a new form of resistance promoting political and social change. *Childhood*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219879970>
- Hooghe, M., Hosch-Dayican, B. & van Deth, J. W. (2014) Conceptualizing political participation. *Acta Politica* 49(3) 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.7>
- Jasper, J. M. (1998) The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum* 13(3) 397–424. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022175308081>

- Johns-Putra, A. (2016) Climate change in literature and literary studies: from cli-fi, climate change theater and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 7(2) 266–282. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.385>
- Kallio, K. P. & Häkli, J. (2011a) Young people's voiceless politics in the struggle over urban space. *GeoJournal* 76(1) 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-010-9402-6>
- Kallio, K. P. & Häkli, J. (2011b) Are there politics in childhood? *Space & Polity* 15(1) 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2011.567897>
- Kallio, K. P. & Häkli, J. (2013) Children and young people's politics in everyday life. *Space and Polity* 17(1) 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2013.780710>
- Klandermans, B. (2007) The demand and supply of participation: social-psychological correlates of participation in social movements. In Snow, D. A., Soule, S. A. & Kriesi, H. (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, 360–379. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, UK. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch16>
- Kutz-Flamenbaum, R. V. (2014) Humor and social movements. *Sociology Compass* 8(3) 294–304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12138>
- Lee, N. (2013) *Childhood and Biopolitics: Climate Change, Life Processes and Human Futures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Levitas, R. (2013) *Utopia as Method. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314253>
- Loader, B. D., Vromen, A. & Xenos, M. A. (2014) The networked young citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(2) 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.871571>
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L. & Cook, J. M. (2001) Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1) 415–444. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Muthoni Mwaura, G. (2018) "Professional students do not play politics": how Kenyan students professionalise environmental activism and produce neoliberal subjectivities. In Pickard, S. & Bessant, J. (eds.) *Young People Re-generating Politics in Times of Crises*, 59–76. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58250-4_4
- O'Toole, T., Lister, M., Marsh, D., Jones, S. & McDonagh, A. (2003) Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people. *Contemporary Politics* 9(1) 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356977032000072477>
- Percy-Smith, B. (2016) Negotiating active citizenship: young people's participation in everyday spaces. In Kallio, K. P. (ed.) *Politics, Citizenship and Rights*, 401–422. Springer Reference, Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4585-57-6_26
- Phelps, E. (2012) Understanding electoral turnout among British young people: a review of the literature. *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1) 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsr056>
- Philo, C. & Smith, F. M. (2003) Guest editorial: political geographies of children and young people. *Space and Polity* 7(2) 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356257032000133883>
- Pickard, S. (2018) Momentum and the movementist "Corbynistas": young people regenerating the Labour Party in Britain. In Pickard, S. & Bessant, J. (eds.) *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*, 115–137. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58250-4_7
- Pickard, S. (2019) Young people and DIO politics: do-it-ourselves political participation. In *Politics, Protest and Young People*, 375–405. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57788-7_12
- Pickard, S. & Bessant, J. (2018a) France's #Nuit Debout social movement: young people rising up and moral emotions. *Societies* 8(4) 100. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8040100>
- Pickard, S. & Bessant, J. (eds.) (2018b) *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58250-4>
- Rainsford, E. (2017) Exploring youth political activism in the United Kingdom: what makes young people politically active in different organisations? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19(4) 790–806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117728666>
- Ramírez Blanco, J. (2018) The reclaim the streets protest parties in London. In *Artistic Utopias of Revolt*, 41–63. Springer International Publishing, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71422-6_3
- Rousell, D. & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A. (2019) A systematic review of climate change education: giving children and young people a "voice" and a "hand" in redressing climate change. *Children's Geographies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1614532>
- Schlosberg, D. & Collins, L. B. (2014) From environmental to climate justice: climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5(3) 359–374. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.275>
- Shepard, B. H. (2011) *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution*. Routledge, New York. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203831489>

- Skelton, T. & Valentine, G. (1997) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. Routledge, London.
- Skelton, T. (2010) Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography. *Area* 42(2) 145–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2009.00891.x>
- Sloam, J. & Ehsan, M. R. (2017) Youth quake: young people and the 2017 general election. *Intergenerational Foundation Research Papers*. Intergenerational Foundation, London.
- Stellaris (2016) Computer game, version 2.3. Paradox Interactive, Stockholm.
- Tanner, T. (2010) Shifting the narrative: child-led responses to climate change and disasters in El Salvador and the Philippines. *Children & Society* 24(4) 339–351. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00316.x>
- Thunberg, G. (2018) Greta Thunberg full speech at UN Climate Change COP24 Conference. YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFkQSGyeCWg>>. 9.7.2019.
- Trajber, R., Walker, C., Marchezini, V., Kraftl, P., Olivato, D., Hadfield-Hill, S., Zara, C. & Fernandes Monteiro, S. (2019) Promoting climate change transformation with young people in Brazil: participatory action research through a looping approach. *Action Research* 17(1) 87–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319829202>
- Wahlström, M. & Wennerhag, M. (2014) Alone in the crowd: lone protesters in Western European demonstrations. *International Sociology* 29(6) 565–583. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580914554117>
- Wahlström, M., Kocyba, P., De Vydt, M., de Moor, J., Wouters, R., Wennerhag, M., van Stekelenburg, J., Uba, K., Saunders, C., Rucht, D., Mikecz, D., Zamponi, L., Lorenzini, J., Kołczyńska, M., Haunss, S., Giugni, M., Gaidyte, T., Doherty, B. & Buzogany, A. (2019) *Protest for a Future: Composition, Mobilization and Motives of the Participants in Fridays For Future Climate Protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European Cities*. Keele University e-Prints, Keele, UK.
- Walgrave, S. & Verhulst, J. (2011) Selection and response bias in protest surveys. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 16(2) 203–222.
- Walgrave, S., Wouters, R. & Ketelaars, P. (2016) Response problems in the protest survey design: evidence from fifty-one protest events in seven countries. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 21(1) 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086/671X-21-1-83>
- Wood, B. E. (2012) Researching the everyday: young people's experiences and expressions of citizenship. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27(2) 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.737047>
- Wring, D., Henn, M. & Weinstein, M. (1999) Young people and contemporary politics: committed scepticism or engaged cynicism? *British Elections and Parties Review* 9(1) 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13689889908413029>
- Young, L. (2018) *Rise: How Jeremy Corbyn Inspired the Young to Create a New Socialism*. Simon & Schuster, London.